

Constructing Human Security Indicators: Objectives, Methods, and Future Prospects

Human Security Indicator Task Team

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Introduction

The JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development (hereafter, the Ogata Institute) has convened a task team comprising volunteers from across JICA and researchers at the Institute to develop a set of human security indicators (HS indicators). Since February 2025, the team has been meeting regularly to explore how such indicators might be constructed. This essay outlines the overall framework for that work, summarizes the current state of discussions within the task team, and looks ahead to the next steps. *as of June 2026

Background

The decision to embark on the development of HS indicators reflects both broader shifts in international development debates and recent changes in the global environment. More specifically, four factors lie behind this effort:

- The limitations of GDP per capita as a development indicator have long been recognized, and alternative measures, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Index (HDI), have been proposed. Even so, no single measure has emerged as definitive.
- JICA and the Ogata Institute are increasingly expected to contribute to international discussions on the post-SDG agenda.

- Given today's increasingly complex and overlapping crises, there is a growing need to further mainstream the concept and practice of human security in both domestic and international arenas.
- Within JICA itself, momentum is building to incorporate a human security perspective into country-specific and thematic strategy documents, and the Ogata Institute is expected to provide knowledge and analysis to support this trend.

Basic Approach

Before launching the task team, the Ogata Institute held a series of internal discussions and agreed on five basic guiding principles:

- HS indicators are understood as a set of existing indicators that objectively describe the situation in each country from a human security perspective.
- Rather than creating a single composite index, the team will select from among existing indicators published by international organizations and private research or survey institutions.
- The team will not produce a ranking of countries.
- In the first stage, a relatively broad set of candidate indicators will be assembled; in the second stage, a final selection will be made.
- No fixed upper limit will be placed on the number of indicators ultimately selected, but the final set should remain compact enough to be intuitively understandable.

The first and second principles reflect careful consideration

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of whether to create a new composite index—similar to the HDI. In the end, the team concluded that it would be extremely difficult to capture the degree to which human security is ensured in a single number, and that doing so could also create the risk that such a number would take on a life of its own, detached from the broader realities it is meant to represent.

Policy for Selecting Indicators

Given the approach outlined above, the central task in constructing HS indicators is to collect existing indicators and assess whether each candidate is appropriate from a human security perspective. To guide this process, the task team agreed on the following five selection criteria:

- The team will select leading indicators that make visible the extent to which people's survival, livelihoods, dignity, and environment are being secured—or, conversely, the extent to which threats to them are being addressed.
- Indicators will principally be selected at the country level, while disaggregated data by attributes such as gender and age will be collected wherever possible. The team is also considering the experimental development of subnational HS indicators.
- Alongside objective indicators, the team will actively include indicators that capture people's subjective perceptions.
- Priority will be given to indicators with broad time-series and cross-sectional coverage. Where no workable alternative exists, composite indices developed by third parties may also be used.
- The three core strategies of human security—protection, empowerment, and solidarity—will be taken into account and reflected in the explanation of how each indicator can be improved in practice.

The first of these criteria lies at the conceptual core of the HS indicator project. Human security is both a way of thinking and a practical agenda aimed at building a world in which all people are free from fear and want, and are able to live in dignity. This spirit is also reflected in the “Pact for the Future,” adopted at the 2024 UN Summit of the Future, which opens with a commitment to ensuring the well-being, safety, and dignity of all people, as well as a healthy planet (United Nations 2024). Accordingly, each selected indicator is intended

to show the extent to which people's survival (freedom from fear), livelihoods (freedom from want), dignity (freedom from humiliation), and environment (the freedom to live on a healthy planet) are being secured.

The second criterion reflects the task team's discussions on the unit of analysis. For practical reasons—chiefly data availability—the selected indicators will primarily be country-level indicators. At the same time, however, the team recognizes that the basic spirit of human security calls for attention to individuals. To better capture inequality and diversity within countries, the team therefore plans to collect data disaggregated by attributes such as gender and age wherever possible, and is also considering the experimental development of HS indicators at the subnational level, such as for regions or communities.

Current Status of the Selection Process

The task team is currently working to identify specific HS indicators from among existing indicator sets, based on the selection policy described above. The first step was to compile a list of possible candidates and discuss the overall landscape as a team. Responsibilities were then assigned by indicator category, and team members are now examining the time-series trends and country-level distributions of each candidate in order to assess in greater depth whether it is suitable for inclusion as an HS indicator.

To give a more concrete sense of what HS indicators might look like, [Table 1](#) presents examples of candidate indicators by category. At present, the task team is using the four elements of human security described above—survival, livelihood, dignity, and environment—as its major categories, each with three or four subcategories. Multiple indicators are then placed under each subcategory, with the intention of eventually publishing them as HS indicators together with data and analytical findings. However, that this work is still at an early stage. The names and scope of the categories, as well as the specific indicators listed under them, remain provisional.

Table 1 Illustrative Categories and Examples of Candidate Indicators

Major Category	Subcategory	Candidate Indicators *As of June 2026
Survival	Disaster	- Deaths and missing persons due to disasters (per 100,000 population) - Persons directly affected by disasters (per 100,000 population) - Disaster economic loss to global GDP - Disaster-damaged infrastructure - Vulnerability index to natural disasters (earthquake, tsunami, flood, typhoon, drought, sea level rise)
	Conflict and violence	- Conflict-related deaths (per 100,000 population) - Homicide deaths (per 100,000 population) - Total humanitarian aid contribution reported per affected country
	Health	- Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births) - Neonatal mortality rate (per 1,000 live births) - Under-five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births) - Infectious disease mortality rate - Non-communicable disease (NCD) mortality rate - UHC service coverage index
	Demography	- Fertility rate - Life expectancy - Healthy life expectancy - Gender ratio (male/female) - Crude rate of net migration (per 1,000 persons)
Livelihood	Education	- Completion rate (primary education, lower secondary education, upper secondary education) - Harmonized Learning Outcomes (HLO) - Adult literacy rate
	Poverty and inequality	- Poverty headcount ratio - Prevalence of undernourishment (PoU) - Palma ratio - Shared Prosperity Premium
	Job	- Unemployment rate - Informal sector employment rate - Completion rate of tertiary education
	Infrastructure and digital transformation	- Access to safe drinking water - Access to electricity - Rural road access - Convenient Access to public transport - Financial service usage rate - Internet usage rate - AI preparedness index
Dignity	Vulnerable people	- Perception of children being respected - Intimate partner violence prevalence among ever partnered women in the previous 12 months - Seats held by women in national parliament (%) - School attendance rate of persons with disabilities - Refugees by country of asylum - Number of IDPs of concern to UNHCR
	Self-esteem and solidarity	- Satisfaction with life - Perceived freedom in life - Social support availability by relatives or friends - Helped a stranger in the past few months - Suicide mortality rate
	Public space	- Worldwide Governance Indicators, Rule of Law - Confidence in judicial system - Worldwide Governance Indicators, Voice and Accountability - Confidence in national government - Freedom in the World Index, Civil Liberties
Environment	Nature	- Freshwater withdrawal (% of available freshwater resources) - Terrestrial biodiversity protection rate - Freshwater biodiversity protection rate - Red List Index - Water consumption embodied in imports - Land use embodied in imports
	Environmental quality	- Ambient air pollution attributable death rate - Nitrogen emissions - Air pollution associated with imports
	Climate change	- Greenhouse gas emissions per capita - Greenhouse gas emissions embodied in imports - Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN) Country Index

Source: Prepared by the author.

While these discussions are still ongoing, several important issues in indicator selection have already come into focus.

First, there is the difficulty of capturing “dignity.” Many candidate indicators in this category differ from those in other major categories, where relatively well-developed statistical data from international organizations are available. Because of data constraints, the dignity category often has to rely on public opinion surveys that ask about individuals’ subjective perceptions or on third-party composite indices that incorporate expert judgment. In highly authoritarian states, for example, people’s responses to survey questions about trust in government may be more biased than in democratic societies.

Second, there is the question of how broadly “survival” should be defined. External factors that directly threaten people’s survival naturally include disasters, conflict, and infectious diseases. At the same time, if survival is understood as enabling each person to live out the full span of life they should be able to enjoy, then education—especially basic education—may also need to be regarded as one of its essential components, insofar as it helps build the minimum capacities required for life.

Third, there is the question of whether each candidate indicator should be assigned to only a single category. For practical reasons, each selected indicator is currently placed under one of the four major categories. In reality, however, many issues cut across categories. Physical or psychological

violence, for example, directly affects individual survival while also undermining dignity. If these forms of violence are placed only under the category of survival, there is a risk that their implications for dignity may be overlooked. Throughout the process of indicator selection and analysis, the team therefore needs to remain mindful of such overlaps.

Future Prospects

In the next stage, the task team will continue the indicator selection process while also beginning a range of analyses using the HS indicators that are ultimately selected. Throughout this process, the team will continue to consult with experts and stakeholders. The selected HS indicators, together with the results of related analyses, are expected to be made public in the form of a report and an online database.

It is our hope that this initiative will contribute to making human security more visible across countries and, in turn, to advancing practical efforts grounded in that perspective.

Reference

United Nations. 2024. *Pact for the Future*. A/RES/79/1. UN General Assembly. <https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future/pact-for-the-future>.